David A. Timko. A Study of the Book Reviewing Habits of *The New York Times Book Review*, 1950-2000. A Master's paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. April, 2001. 57 pages. Advisor: David Carr

The New York Times Book Review is perhaps the most important and most influential book review publication in the United States. It is used both by the general educated public as well as by librarians in making book-buying decisions. This study investigates the type of book that *The New York Times Book Review* typically features. Numbers and percentages of different categories of books, such as humanities and the sciences, are given. Such characteristics as numbers of university press titles and small press titles are also included. Furthermore, the professional affiliation of the authors of the reviewed books and of the reviewers is recorded. The study covers the period 1950-2000.

Headings:

Book reviews and reviewing – Evaluation

College and university libraries – Book selection

Scholarly publishing

Publishers and publishing

Content analysis

A STUDY OF THE BOOK REVIEWING HABITS OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*, 1950-2000

by
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A Study of the Book Reviewing Habits of *The New York Times Book Review*, 1950-2000

"Research in the field of collection development needs some negotiation skills. The concerns of building and managing collections have not always corresponded with prominent issues in our public life. That correspondence might further create a cultural criticism that could direct progressive social and political change."[1]

Statement of Problem

Collection development librarians have long used book reviews as a tool for selecting books and other library materials. Many professional journals aimed at a librarian audience make ample use of book reviews – *Publisher's Weekly*, *Booklist*, and *Library Journal* are representative. Librarians at all varieties of libraries – school, public, and academic – regularly make use of such reviews, especially when faced with particularly difficult selection decisions. Other book review publications, perhaps the most important of which is *Choice*, are designed more specifically for academic librarians. More recently, online reviews such as found on Amazon.com and elsewhere have provided timely information, including amateur reviews, about recently published works that often proves invaluable to the selector.[2]

Reliance on book reviews as a selection tool, or at least as a selection aid, is, however, somewhat problematic. For such a practice tends to privilege those titles that are in fact reviewed, particularly those that appear in the review publications most

commonly used by librarians, such as *Publishers' Weekly* and *Choice*. Those titles that do not appear in such publications, and are reviewed only in more specialized journals geared to the professional scholar, might as a result have the tendency to be selected by librarians less frequently.

The importance of the book review in the selection process should not, however, be overstated. It should be remembered that typically the large majority of selection decisions, at least in large research libraries, are made without reference to any sort of review. In fact, many selection decisions, especially at larger research libraries, are outsourced – in effect, they are made by book vendors. Furthermore, only a small percentage of books published are reviewed in any source; the book selector who relies solely on published reviews to identify titles for purchase will thus never even consider the large majority of books.[3] Nonetheless, librarians no doubt will continue to make use of book reviews, and reviews will remain an important source of information – for readers, scholars, publishers, as well as librarians. It is thus not surprising that the use of book reviews as a collection development tool has frequently been the subject of research. The more we know about the reviewing process, the better position we are in to make effective use of reviews.

This study is a content analysis of the reviews that have appeared in the *New York Times Book Review* (*NYTBR).* It represents an attempt to measure what changes have taken place in this publication over the last half century (1950-2000) in what I am calling its reviewing habits. By this I mean both the type of books that this publication typically reviews, as well as who is chosen to do the reviewing. The rationale for focusing on the *NYTBR* alone is that, at least traditionally, this publication is widely read by the

(educated) public as well as by scholars and librarians. It appears in the nation's newspaper of record and thus enjoys a relatively high circulation.[4] Many rely on the *NYTBR* to make their book purchasing decisions. Others rely on it to keep abreast of what is happening in the publishing world. It is, in a word, a highly influential publication and occupies some of the most prominent space in American review publications.

I know of no study that documents the relationship between a given title's appearance in a review appearing in the *NYTBR* and its eventual sales, whether to individuals or to libraries, though perhaps it is axiomatic that the correlation between these two variables is high. In many instances, no doubt, a title would achieve notoriety and make its way onto bestseller lists with or without a review in the *NYTBR*. Be that as it may, authors and publishers certainly go to pains to see that their book is featured in prominent review publications, most importantly the highly influential *NYTBR*.

But the book reviewing process at the *NYTBR* is veiled in obscurity. What books are selected for review? Who is chosen as the reviewer? As Steven Weinberg has said, "almost every author, agent, editor, and publisher in the country has a conspiracy theory about the *Time*'s reviews" (Weinberg 1990: 52). Some, particularly (it seems) these days on the political left, are uncomfortable with the power that the *NYTBR* has, with the effect it can have on the success or lack of success of a recently published title. Among its most vocal critics has been Herbert Schiller, who has claimed that the *NYTBR* favors titles published by publishers with large advertising budgets (1996: 9):

> Though it cannot be the sole consideration, the advertising budget a publisher devotes to the *Book Review* cannot avoid making an impression on the editor choosing which books to review. There may not be a one-to-one relationship involving one book and its specific advertising budget,

> but the yearly advertising expenditure by the publisher in the *New York Times* can only be disregarded at the magazine's financial peril. No editor can be oblivious to such an economic fact of life. The evidence that supports this contention is provided weekly in the *Book Review* (or any other national review channel). Count the number of times that a university press (tiny advertiser) book is reviewed. Note the publishers' names of the books that are reviewed. Invariably they are the big spenders on promotional copy. Finally, look for mention of works that are published by alternative or critical houses. Occasionally one may be found. (The word "occasionally" may be overly generous.)

Schiller's criticism of the present state of the publishing industry echoes the sentiments expressed by, *inter alia*, André Schiffrin, the editor of the independently owned New Press, who has recently denounced the increasingly consolidated publishing industry, which he feels has the effect of squashing those with critical views (2000). Schiffrin clearly has something to say, but his work is closer to a memoir than it is a scholarly study. He has plenty of anecdotal evidence in support of his argument, and this evidence is often compelling. Yet, his views are hardly those of a disinterested bystander.[5] Similarly, Schiller states his impassioned case without proof. In order to make such a claim stick, hard evidence must be cited. Perhaps Schiller felt that his case is so self-evidently true as to preclude the need for demonstration. In any event, the present study can be seen as a partial attempt to address this need.[6]

Once the nature of the books that have typically over the last half century been subject to review in the *NYTBR* has been ascertained, a comparison is then made between what the *NYTBR* has reviewed, and how its reviewing habits have changed over time, with trends in the book publishing industry. Do the book reviews accurately reflect the type of book that publishers are publishing? Are the types of books being reviewed in the *NYTBR* representative of what was published in the past and what is being published today, as measured in terms of the percentage of books published, and has this percentage

changed over time? It will be noted whether there has been a statistically significant change. Additionally, an attempt is made to document whose books, both in terms of the publisher and the author, are being reviewed and who is being assigned the responsibility of reviewing them. Here I am interested in the professional status of the authors of reviewed books, and in who is writing the reviews that appear in the pages of the *NYTBR*. The *NYTBR* occupies some of the most prominent real estate in the book-reviewing world, and an effort to identify the type of book that typically appears in the publication promises to pay dividends. If a librarian must rely, at least in part, on the *NYTBR* to identify books for purchase, it will be useful to know the types of books such a policy is likely to produce. While it is difficult to imagine that any library, regardless of its size or mission, would ever rely exclusively on the *NYTBR* as a selection tool, those many libraries that do use it, armed with a knowledge of its reviewing habits, can then devise some method to correct for whatever imbalance there may be. Determining who is writing the reviews promises to be equally fruitful. Presumably, the better the credentials and qualifications of the reviewer, the more authoritative the review should be, and the more credence it should have in the eyes of the selector. If librarians knew more about how well informed the typical review appearing in the *NYTBR* tends to be, they would be in a better position to gauge how much time they should spend on this publication.

Notes

[1] Lundin (2000): xix.
[2] See "Amateurs on Amazon," *The Economist* v.352 (Aug. 28, 1999): 65 [unsigned article].
[3] A joint study by the Resources and Technical Services Division of the American Library Association and the Association of American Publishers in 1975 reported that only 10% of the books published in the United States were reviewed. This number seems not to have changed much since then. See *The Bowker Annual of Library and Book Trade Information*. 33rd ed. (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1988): 393-401, esp. 396-397.

[4] Howard (1992): 96, cites that 80,000 subscribe specifically to the *NYTBR*. This is in addition to the 1.6 million subscriptions to the Sunday edition of *The New York Times* [per *Editor and Publisher International Year Book* 80th ed. (2000)].

[5] For a decidedly more sanguine view of the present and future of publishing, see now Epstein (2001). Epstein, the former editor of *The American Scholar*, acknowledges some of the same problems with publishing that occupy Schiffrin's attention, but feels that the Internet has providentially appeared to rescue the publishing world from the conglomerates and the manner of distribution from the chains.

[6] Others have expressed somewhat more favorable views toward the *NYTBR* and its reviewing practices. Note especially Howard (1992): 108, who claims that book reviewing, including that done at the *NYTBR*, is the "only level playing field in publishing left."

Literature Review

Various aspects of book reviewing – both the actual process as well as the possible impact that it has on library purchasing decisions and collection building – have been the subject of investigation by researchers and commentators. Researchers have approached the topic from a number of different perspectives – some studies have been by library scholars and practicing librarians, other have been done by students of communication, still others by critics of or commentators on the publishing industry. Many of the published studies have been content analyses of book reviews. Lindholm-Romantschuk (1998: esp. 72-76), in her recent wide-ranging study on the place of the scholarly book review in scholarly communications, has concluded that even though its primary focus is not on scholarly books, the *NYTBR* performs a sort of vetting function for the scholarly review journals. Together with *The New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *NYTBR* obliquely plays a vital role in identifying the sort of titles that in time will appear in the discipline-specific journals.

Hinman (1999) has concluded that, contrary to the commonly held opinion, British reviewers of books by Americans are not biased. Macleod (1981) researched, among other things, the effect of gender in the reviewing process, in terms of the type of book the two sexes tended to review and the likelihood of their giving a book a negative review. Regnery (1966) investigated book reviews for liberal bias, and concluded that conservative books were generally fairly reviewed. Natowitz et al. (1997) analyzed various history review journals, and (not surprisingly, in my opinion) found that

evaluations offered by the reviews of the same title tend to vary from journal to journal. Jordy et al. (1999) addressed the issue of publisher reputation from a study of book reviews. Their main contribution was the devising of a methodology for determining the quality of a publisher from a selection of reviews. Serebnick and Cullars (1984) studied whether small publishers' books received less favorable reviews than those of larger publishers, and concluded that they did not. Later, Serebnick (1992) investigated whether there was a relationship between the number of reviews a title received and the number of libraries that hold a copy of that title. She concluded that there was, in fact, a positive relationship.

Lindholm-Romantschuk (1998) argued that the large university presses, particularly Oxford, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, receive a disproportionate share of the attention in the *NYTBR*, *The New York Review of Books*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*, while "[s]maller or more regional university presses tend to get marginalized" (Lindholm-Romantschuk 1998: 72). Her study covered the years 1971 through 1990, with a slight bias in favor of the early 1980s; however, she did not attempt to measure changes over time.[1] Sander (1991), in his overview of the work done on the reception of German writers in the American media, observed that the number of reviews of foreign works had undergone a steady decline, at least when expressed as a percentage of the total number of books reviewed.

There is a general agreement among book review studies that book reviews, regardless of the publication in which they appear, are almost always favorable (e.g. Jordy et al. 1999; Fialkoff 1994).[2] It seems that, often, the most damning reception a book can get is silence on the part of the critics; there is little need for negative reviews

(Gross 2000). As Macleod (1981: 304) has observed, "For most books, simply getting reviewed is the main hurdle." With a review comes media exposure, and with that comes sales.[3] The *NYTBR* is important, but it is not the sole arbitrator. As Serebnick (1992) has shown, the more reviews a given title gets, the better in terms of that title's library sales. This fact is also well known to publishers, who promote the books that they publish in such a way as to ensure that they are reviewed as frequently as possible in journals as prominent as possible. They do this by, among other things, distributing copies of their recently published books to the major book review journals (e.g. Lindholm-Romantschuk 1998: 70; Greco 1997: 191-197).

Most of these studies have involved, to a greater or lesser extent, content analysis of the actual text of the reviews. They have also tended to focus on relatively short time periods, often five or ten years, and even when they have studied longer period of time, they have generally not analyzed whatever changes had occurred (but cf. Sander 1991). This study involves a slightly different approach to analyzing book reviews. Conceptually, I am much more interested in the *longue durée*, how book reviewing trends have changed over time. Instead of the content of the reviews, my investigation concentrates on the type of book that book reviews choose to review. In focusing on data that is inherently more objective (such as publisher and author), I hope to avoid the subjective sort of content analysis commonly employed. I am not interested in what the reviews have to say, since what they have to say is not particularly important anyway. We now know that what really matters is whether a given title is in fact reviewed, and presumably where the review appears. The fewer value judgments necessitated on the part of the researcher the better. Some researchers (e.g. Jordy et al. 1999) have relied on

their own subjective impression of the tone of book reviews. My study should better allow the facts to speak for themselves.

I have not found any study in the published literature that has adopted a comparable methodology. However, the potential importance of which authors' and publishers' books are reviewed, and who is chosen as the reviewer, has occasionally attracted attention. Champion and Morris (1973) considered whether the editors of book review journals showed any bias against using southern reviewers; they concluded that at one time they did, but that this trend had reversed itself.

Degen (1993) analyzed the status of the reviewer of titles translated from German and other languages that appeared in the *NYTBR* in the early 1970s. She was not so much concerned with judging the content of the review, and in this respect, my study is similar to her. On the other hand, Hirsch et al. (1974) conducted a study (in the context of the sciences) of how professional status of both the reviewer and the author under review was linked to evaluative content. Their surprising findings were that the higher the status of the reviewer and the lower the status of author, the more favorable the review. Hirsch's study required the researchers actually to read the book reviews, and make judgment calls regarding their content, decisions that are necessarily subjective. Although various methodologies have been devised to confront this problem (e.g. Jordy et al. 1999), it seems to me that this is an unnecessary task. If the actual content of the reviews is of minimal importance, then why should the researcher bother to read them in the first place?

Notes

[1] On the reputation of scholarly publishers, see Metz and Stemmer (1996), whose survey of librarians found that the university presses of Harvard, Cambridge, Oxford, and Stanford (in that order) had the highest reputations of the scholarly publishers.

[2] But note the implications of Furnham (1986), who expresses concern that there is an incentive for a reviewer to give negative reviews as being the surer route to self-promotion; but cf. Furnham (1997), which concludes that this is not in fact the case.

[3] As Gross (2000): 445-450, points out, there really is no need for a negative review – the most effective way to silence a book is to ignore it. However, cf. the implications of Furnham 1986, who expressed concern that there is an incentive for a reviewer to give negative reviews as being the surer route to self-promotion. Furnham later (1997) addressed this question again, but this time largely concluded that, contrary to his earlier fears, there was not an incentive for the reviewer to give negative reviews.

Methodology

In view of Macleod's acute observation that the actual existence of a book review is more important than its content, it seems more profitable to concentrate on what titles book review sources are deciding to review (and thus, in effect, promote). Concentrating solely on the *New York Times Book Review* (henceforth, *NYTBR*) needs hardly be justified. This publication enjoys a relatively large circulation and is read by the general (educated) public, as well as by scholars and librarians. Furthermore, it is freely distributed at many bookstores. It thus frequently has a much greater impact on public opinion and a much greater effect on overall sales than do the more specialized scholarly review journals. Even though the *NYTBR* is not aimed specifically at librarians, book selectors do commonly consult it, if only to monitor what titles are being highlighted in the national media. Public libraries have long made use of the *NYTBR*, but large academic libraries also make use of the publication. For instance, the Collection Development and Acquisitions Departments at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have set up an arrangement with their main domestic vendor to supply automatically all titles reviewed in the *NYTBR*. Similarly, book selectors in the Collection Management Department at North Carolina State University regularly review the *NYTBR* for potential purchases and are informed by their principle vendor when a title has appeared in that publication.

This study encompasses the period 1950-2000. It focuses specifically on the years 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. Thus six different years, spread over a period of fifty-one years, are considered. The expectation was that this would allow for trends in book reviewing to emerge, an expectation that has, I think, been fulfilled. A random sample of six issues from each of the selected years was drawn. Thus, a total of thirty-six issues form the basis of the study. The sample size was based in part on Drott's paper on sampling in a library setting (1969). An alternative approach would have been to choose the target years of the study based on the editorial leadership of the *NYTBR*. Potentially, it would have been profitable to see how different leadership affected the selection decisions of the publication.

First, a few words on what reviews I have and have not included in this study. This is not a trivial question. After much hesitation, I decided to include short reviews in my study. These reviews typically appear in sections marked "In Brief," or something similar. I had initially determined to include only those reviews that appear in the Table of Contents for each issue, but I soon realized that the practice of the *NYTBR* has varied over the years. In some years, short reviews are included in the Table of Contents, and in others they are not. Thus, excluding them in some years and including them in others would have been unnecessarily arbitrary and would have run the risk of skewing the results. I have, however, excluded the sections on specific genres, such as mysteries, westerns, science fiction and fantasy, romance, and the like. My rationale here is that these titles are fairly consistently not listed in the Table of Contents, and thus receive somewhat less exposure. Even when they are listed, I have excluded them from consideration. A more important consideration is that certain publishers specialize in

genre literature, and had I included them, I would have, again, risked skewing my results. For similar reasons, I made the decision early on to exclude reviews of children's books, which are to an even greater extent the province of specialist publishers. Also excluded from the study are articles that are not specifically reviews. These general essays may or may not discuss actual, recently published books. More recent issues are much less likely to contain such essays, but they were a normal feature of the *NYTBR* in the 1950s and 1960s.

Specifically, my study focuses on the following elements in the book reviews: number of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry titles that are reviewed; the number of university press titles and commercial/trade publisher titles reviewed; the number of small publishers' books reviewed; the professional status of the author of the reviewed book and of the reviewer. It would be useful for librarians to know how "scholarly" the selections of the *NYTBR* are, and various means have been adopted to measure this factor. Numerous obstacles, however, attend such an inquiry. Lindholm-Romantschuk (1998: 70) in effect resorted to defining a "scholarly" title as one that was published by a university press. This is one useful measure, even if it is in itself potentially misleading. One virtue of this approach is the ease of recording such data; it is highly objective.

Some have observed that university presses themselves have increasingly moved in the direction of more popular works which hold the promise of appealing to a broader audience; this trend has in part been a response to the declining buying power of college and university libraries, the traditional market for university press titles (Greco 1997: 205-211; Greco 2001). In this context, it is worth noting that the most recent figures reveal a decline in university press book sales.[1] Some have gone so far as to see the more

general market for serious, and perhaps even not so serious, writing as the key to the continued vitality of the university press (e.g. Greco 2001). This study will not be able to ascertain whether there is a statistically significant relationship between the number of university press titles reviewed and other recorded characteristics of the reviewed titles (such as the number of works judged to be "popular"). It will, however, with its emphasis on long-term trends, place whatever bias the *NYTBR* has shown over the years toward the university press market in context.

This study also attempts to get at the scholarly nature of the *NYTBR* by measuring whose books are being reviewed and who is doing the reviewing. It has been asserted that art of reviewing books is in decline, and that, more specifically, fewer scholars with university affiliations are reviewing books in general interest publications like the *NYTBR* (Parini 1999; Cannadine 1999). It may be the case that there are no longer any public intellectuals of the stature of Edmund Wilson or H. L. Mencken who made the review into an art form.[2] Admittedly, university faculty are not necessarily public intellectuals. Nevertheless, by measuring the number, and percentage, of university faculty reviewers, we will be able to arrive at an informed estimation as to whether critics such as Parini are correct in their allegation that academics are not writing for the *NYTBR* at the same rate today as they did in the past.

Reviews in the *NYTBR* are signed: the professional status of the reviewer is typically clearly stated at the bottom of the review; that of the author of the reviewed book is normally mentioned somewhere in the body of the review. My methodology here has been to record the professional status of the reviewer. To simplify, I have recorded reviewers as one of two things: either as college or university professor or as anything

else. In other words, I was interested only in identifying how many of the reviewers were by profession academics. In so simplifying my method of coding, I realize that I am giving an incomplete picture of the type of the professional affiliation of the reviewers. I realize too that university faculty do not necessarily write the best, or the best-informed, reviews. I had initially intended, following Degen's model (1993), to record different types of reviewers, including fiction writers and poets, journalists, and other non-professional writers (like sports stars or politicians, for instance), but this system proved untenable. Rather than give a misleading or inaccurate picture of the reviewers, the decision was made to record only whether the reviewer was in fact a university professor. If the status of the reviewer was nowhere explicitly stated, it was not recorded. Under the rubric college and university professor, I have included academics and even teachers of all types; I decided to include teachers in this category only after some hesitation, though the number so identified is not particularly large (they mainly come from the early years covered by this study). It is possible, of course, that some reviewers who are identified only as the author of a book also hold an academic post of some sort, but unless this was explicitly stated, these individuals were recorded simply as not being professors.

Coding authors was a somewhat more difficult undertaking. Most frequently, the profession or professional affiliation of the author is noted at some point in the review (though this is not always the case in short reviews, which is one reason that I initially hesitated including them in the study), but finding this information does necessitate scanning the review. Although this is something that I had hoped to avoid, it generally proved not to be overly time-consuming. As with reviewers, the decision was made to simplify coding by recording only whether or not the author was identified as a university

or college professor. Both authors of non-fiction as well as fiction identified in the text of the review as professors were coded as such. It is admittedly likely, especially in short reviews where space is limited, that many authors of books that are featured in short reviews were not identified as academics even though they did hold academic posts; it would seem that this possibility is especially likely in the case of fiction works. More could have been learned by recording the authors in a more sophisticated manner, which may have better allowed for an identification of works that are less demanding, or less literary, in nature, and were reviewed in the *NYTBR* primarily for reasons other than their merits.

In her study of works in translation that appeared in the *NYTBR* in the early 1970s, Degan (1993: 216-217) used a somewhat similar coding method. However, she used the additional category of "writer" to identify reviewers. She found that 40% of reviewers of translated works were university professors or academics; 70% were writers. (In her coding system, a reviewer could potentially be identified as both a professor and as a writer.) Her conclusion was that the quality and qualifications of the reviewers were high, higher, she seems to imply, than they were in the years preceding her period of study 1970-1974, though she cites no proof for this contention. Of course, books in translation are not a representative sampling of the reviewed titles appearing in the *NYTBR*. I will have more to say on translations in the *NYTBR* below.

As mentioned above, the fate of small publishers' titles is frequently a matter of discussion in the library literature, and it is important to see to what extent the *NYTBR* can be relied upon to identify such titles, and whether its reviewing tendencies with regard to small publishers has changed with time. This is all the more important, it seems

to me, in an age of the corporatization of the publishing industry, in which fewer and fewer companies are responsible for a larger and larger percentage of the books published. One need hardly be a Herbert Schiller or André Schiffrin to find this worrisome. A study carried out seventeen years ago by Serebnick and Cullars (1984) found that 47% of small publisher titles published in 1981-1982 received at least one review, but that only 5% received as many as four. It is likely that they have exaggerated the number of such titles reviewed, since they excluded more than 100 titles from an initial sample of 327, on the grounds that these could not be found in the OCLC database. More relevantly, they found that the *NYTBR* reviewed "substantially fewer" small press books than did *Publishers' Weekly*, *Library Journal*, *Choice*, and *Booklist*. In view of this study, and the concerns such as Schiller's noted above, the publishers' names of all book reviews analyzed in this study have been recorded. Defining what a small press is has been a notoriously vexing problem (cf. Serebnick 1992: 271). For the purposes of this study, small publishers were defined as those that are listed in the annual *Directory of Small Press & Magazine Editors & Publishers*. Using this method alone was effective in identifying most of the small presses, but it was quickly determined to be insufficient, for the directory is not all-inclusive. When a press that was suspected of being a small press was not initially found in the directory, a search of the Internet was performed. This additional step confirmed that a few other small presses could also legitimately be termed small presses. Unfortunately, this methodology for identifying small presses, which relied in part on the Internet, was not deemed conducive to collecting data from previous years – there would be an inevitable skewing of the results. Thus, data for small presses was collected only for 2000. Generally, small presses were considered by definition to be

independent – i.e. not subsidiaries of a larger publishing entity. Typically, publisher websites do reveal whether they are affiliated with a larger publishing conglomerate.

Other characteristics of the titles appearing in book review that have been noted include the number of reprint editions and the number of translations. Clearly, the relative number of translated works that appear in the *NYTBR* ought to be of concern to librarians (e.g. Makuch 1992). It would useful for them to know to what extent the *NYTBR* can be relied upon to identify books written by non-English speakers/writers. The concern that librarians nation-wide are producing homogenous, America-centric collections is a real one. One researcher was able devote an entire dissertation to book reviews appearing in the *NYTBR* in the period 1970-1975 of works by foreign, especially German, authors (mainly, but not solely, translations) (Degen 1993). One of her findings was that reviews of 106 translated works appeared in the *NYTBR* over the course of 1974 alone (Degen 1993: 234). She also found that, by a wide margin, works originally written in French and German (in that order) were predominant among translated books (Degen 1993: 216).[3] The relative number of translated works that are featured in the *NYTBR* may also be seen as a useful gauge for measuring the intellectual vigor of the publication. Presumably, translated works will tend to be more demanding -- there is little interest in the United States in foreign popular culture. An interesting study, one that unfortunately lies outside the scope of the present essay, would be to investigate more recent trends in the nature of translated works appearing the review. We might expect that, for instance, the number of works translated from Spanish has risen in recent years, especially in view of such figures as José Saramago, Octavio Paz, and Gabriel García Márquez having won the Nobel Prize in Literature in recent years.

Notes

[1] *Publishers Weekly* 248:10 (March 5, 2001): 12, notes a 2.4% decline, compared to an overall growth in the publishing industry of 3.4%. This decline cannot yet be considered a trend, however. In 1996-97, for instance, there was a healthy 6.5% growth in university press book sales, compared to the industry's growth of 6.4% [*Publishers Weekly*246:9 (March 1, 1999): 10].

[2] See the roundtable discussion of the current state of the "public intellectual," where a variety of viewpoints are stated, in "The Future of the Public Intellectual: a Forum," *The Nation* 272:6 (Feb. 12, 2001): 25-35. Members on the panel included John Donatich, publisher of Basic Books; Russell Jacoby, UCLA professor; Jean Bethke Elshtain, University of Chicago; Stephen Carter, Yale University; Herbert Gans, Columbia University; Steven Johnson, editor of feedmag.com; and Christopher Hitchens, writer for *The Nation* and *Vanity Fair*.

[3]Degen (1993) was only one of a series of New York University dissertations written under the direction of Volkmar Sander on the reception of German (and other foreign) literature in the United States. Sander (1991) summarized their findings, not including Degen's, by stating that the relative number of translated works from various languages had remained pretty constant (at least from 1870 to 1970), but the absolute number of translated works has diminished over time.

Data Collection and Coding

Back issues of the *NYTBR* are on microfilm. Data collection was a fairly labor-intensive process. Each title reviewed was coded in the following manner:

Sc – Science [Generally includes all titles with any discernable scientific merit, regardless of whether it is "scholarly" or popular; predictably, most of these titles were rather popular in nature. Also included here are Technology and Medicine. Unlike Degen (1993: 245), Psychology titles were coded as "Social Science," and not as "Science."]

SS – Social Science [Interpreted rather broadly to include politics and current affairs, and also the academic fields of Sociology, Psychology, Economics, Political Science more generally, and Anthropology, Law, among others. Some current events titles coded "SS" bordered on "Popular" (see below); when there was doubt, a title was generally coded as "SS."]

H – Humanities [Interpreted to include the arts and humanities works of non-fiction, excluding History. Literary Criticism, Language, Art, Music, Philosophy (but not Psychology), and Religion are all included here. Sometimes also included are reprints of classic literary works (fiction, poetry, or drama), especially when they include a new introduction or interpretive essay. Most frequently, however, creative works were coded as "fiction" or "poetry." Drama constituted a negligible percentage.]

Hist. – History [Since this includes such a large group of reviewed titles, I felt that History merited a separate rubric. This is justified in part on the grounds that History straddles the Social Sciences and Humanities.]

M – Memoirs/Autobiographies [Included here are all non-fiction works that are primarily autobiographical in nature. Some few titles coded as "M," received the additional code of "P," if they were judged to be popular in nature.

P – Popular works (Typically includes such things as cookbooks, travel books, popular culture, and those titles that didn't seem rigorous enough to be included in the SS category. I tried to use this category sparingly, since it is by nature subjective. This designator was not exclusive, in that it was occasionally used in combination with another code, though this was done only sparingly.)

B – Biographies (This category overlaps with all the others. Thus, a title could be considered a Sc/B, or a SS/B, a H/B, a H(H)/B, or a P/B, but not a M/B, for obvious reasons.)

Further, I counted the number of Fiction and Nonfiction titles reviewed in each issue. I have separately noted the number of works of poetry (in some issues these were included in the "Fiction" or "Fiction and Poetry" section, in some issues elsewhere). I had also intended to document the number of works of drama, but there were too few in my sample (only one or two) for the results to be statistically significant. Instead, I collapsed these titles into the fiction section, and thus, the "fiction" rubric should more accurately be called something like "Creative works aside from poetry." The near-complete neglect of drama in itself was not surprising. Plays are more suitably reviewed as performances rather than as written works. The few dramatic works that did turn up in the sample were collapsed into the fiction section.

Limits of Study

My expectations that both the reviewer and the author would be clearly identified proved, in general, to be justified. In a fair number of instances, however, the author of the book was not clearly identified. In these instances (I estimate roughly 15%) I have simply coded the author as "unidentified or unknown." Since the concern was only to determine the percentage of authors and reviewers identified as professors, no special effort was made to determine the number of unidentified authors or reviewers. There were some instances when I personally may have known, or thought that I knew, the identity of an otherwise unidentified author (e.g. as a university professor). In these cases, I have tried to be consistent in coding the author as "unidentified or unknown," in order to avoid bias. I have not included these authors in the final statistics.

For the most part, excluded from the study are any titles not listed in the Table of Contents. Here, the goal has not been absolute consistency. For instance, titles listed under "Books in Brief" (or something similar) have been included. These titles receive somewhat less exposure than titles that are granted full-length reviews, and thus treating them as statistical equals is somewhat misleading. However, in some years of the *NYTBR*, titles reviewed in brief are listed, by title, in the Contents. In other years, this is not the case. Therefore, all titles listed under a "Books in Brief" section are included, regardless of whether the title appears in the Contents, except in those instances when the brief section focuses on a certain, specialized genre (like mysteries, for instance). Thus

also excluded from consideration are all titles listed under such headings as “New and Noteworthy Paperbacks.” In some instances, relatively “interesting” titles were listed here, such as translations. The approach adopted, whether misguided or not, was to include only newly published (hardcover) titles (cf. Degen 1993, who was more inclusive in terms of which titles formed the basis for her study).

Other features of the *NYTBR* that have not been considered, but which would be fascinating to study, include advertisements and letters to the editor. The latter might provide fascinating indications of who typically reads the *NYTBR* – potentially valuable information for researchers interested in the flow of knowledge in the press. Advertisements also might shed light on the intended, or supposed, audience of the *NYTBR*, as well as provide some interesting glimpses at social history in general. It is perhaps of more than incidental consequence to report that the microfilmed version of the *NYTBR* used for this study seemed to be intact (including advertisements), aside from one or two rare occasions when the text was somewhat obscured. This is a salutary reminder to those who may otherwise be convinced by Nicholson Baker’s (2001) recent shrill attacks against the efforts made by librarians to preserve the intellectual contents of newspapers on microfilm.

A more targeted study of the types of books that have appeared in the *NYTBR* would likely be informative. For instance, we might conjecture that the number of titles on Native American themes increased over the years as the United States has become more cognizant of the plight and history of these people. But it might not be the case that this heightened national sensitivity, which is surely reflected in, for instance, the publishing record in recent years of most university presses of the plains states and

southwestern states, has not affected the contents of the *NYTBR*, and if so, this would be an interesting fact to document. Similarly, we might surmise that the number of titles by African Americans has increased in recent decades, at least since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, but this too would need to be documented. Difficulties here involve identification of an author (or a reviewer) as an African-American. It would be somewhat less difficult to identify an author or reviewer as either male or female, and gender shifts in the *NYTBR* is another potentially fascinating area for future research.

Some might allege that my selection of target years for the study has inadvertently allowed a bias to creep in. It might be contended, for instance, that in election years, such as 2000, there will naturally tend to be more political books, which I coded as "SS" (social sciences). This is, perhaps, a fair point: it is true, as we shall see, that the "SS" category bulks large for 2000 (20.36%), and it is not at all inconceivable that this may in part have been due to its being a campaign season. But a conscious effort was made to ensure a good, preferably even, spread of target years, and so selecting the years seemed to me to be on the whole the better approach. Bias in the selection is an inevitable problem, and even if I had chosen to use, say, the years 1949, 1959, and so on, other unforeseen biases no doubt would have resulted. The possibility of their being bias in the selection of years was noted from the beginning of this study, but it was felt that in order to have anything saying, it was important to collect the data from certain select years, rather from scattered years. Furthermore, if I may anticipate one of my findings, with regard to the specific objection that years of presidential elections possibly skewing the results, it is interesting to note the *small* percentage of social science titles reviewed in

1980 (a presidential election year). It is instructive to compare the social science figure of 1990 (16.44%) with that of 1980 (8.27%). Clearly, other factors are at work.

A more valid criticism, alluded to above, may with some merit be aimed at the decision to select the target years with complete disregard for who the lead editor of the *NYTBR* was at any given time. The study could easily have been done in such a way as to measure more directly the tangible result that any changed editorial policy introduced by different editors may have had on the contents of the *NYTBR*.

Summary of Results

Data is laid out in the following ways: Tables I-A through I-E (see Appendix A) are organized by year. There is a separate table for each target year. Each table contains data on the number of titles in the sample in each field of study chosen for analysis (Humanities, Social Sciences, etc.), as well as percentage of the total sample that this number represents. General book publishing data, taken from George Thomas Kurian's *Datapedia of the United States, 1790-2000: American Year by Year* (1994) and *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, can also be found in Tables I A-E. The total number of books published in each target year appears under each table; the percentage of books published in each field of study is also given (in the third column of each table). Book publishing data was, at the time of this study, unavailable for 2000; instead, an average of the data for the three previous years (1997-1999) was used. This information came from the most recent issue of the *Bowker's Annual*. Unfortunately, the method of counting the number of books published annually in the United States changed in the mid-1990s, and so the number of total books is not directly comparable to the numbers for earlier years.[1] It is likely that, due to this different method of counting, the relative number of the different categories of books has also been skewed. Also calculated is an estimated percentage of the total number of titles published that were reviewed in the *NYTBR* in each target year (thus, for instance, in

1950, an estimated 20.90% of the titles published in the United States were reviewed in the *NYTBR*).

Table II (Appendix B) includes information on the professional affiliation of authors and reviewers. It too is organized by year. Here, chi square data is given (to indicate statistical significance). Tables III A and B (Appendix C) include data on the type of publishers. Table III-A includes data, arranged by year, on university presses, both as represented in the sample and as represented in the publishing industry as a whole. Table III-B includes data on small presses. Data prior to 2000 is to be viewed with caution, as it was not always easy to determine which publishers qualified as small presses. It is likely that the numbers for these years have been inflated. Nevertheless, in order to present a more complete picture, data for the sample of each target year is given. No information for the publishing industry is given; it was felt that this data would be meaningless in view of the difficulties involved in defining small presses and the changing methods used to count published books.

Many points stand out. First, despite the fact that there has been a dramatic increase over that time in the number of titles published, the number of titles reviewed has not increased. In fact, this study shows an overall decline in the number of titles reviewed. Presumably, this is due to a quirk in sampling since the number of titles reviewed in the *NYTBR* has remained remarkably steady (roughly 2000 annually) since at least 1960.[2] Over that same time, the number of titles published has at least doubled, perhaps quadrupled, depending on the method of counting used. Sander (1991) has commented on the decreasing percentage of books in translation that are being published and reviewed, both in the *NYTBR* and elsewhere, in the United States. The same trend is

thus in evidence for all titles published – an increasingly small percentage of the titles published in the United States are subject of a review in the *NYTBR*. According to the figures reported in this study, fully one book in five published in 1950 in the United States (20%) was reviewed in the *NYTBR*. Thereafter, the percentage dropped precipitously, and consistently, reaching 2.7% in 1980, when it leveled out. No doubt, this decline is a function of the changes that took place in the publishing industry, which includes among other phenomena the burgeoning of the paperback trade. In any event, no longer can the *NYTBR* be expected to review a significant proportion of the newly published works of fiction and nonfiction. Not that the *NYTBR* is entirely to blame – the last several decades have seen an explosion in the publishing world (whether that trend will continue remains to be seen), and the *NYTBR* could not perhaps expect to cover this explosion fully. The *NYTBR* as a result has to be more selective in what it chooses to review, and as a result potentially wields more power than ever before.

Perhaps the most striking figures are in the relative number of fiction and nonfiction titles reviewed. Fiction is greatly over represented, in comparison with its share of the publishing industry. Taken as a whole, fully 38.5% of the titles reviewed were fiction, the percentage never dipping below 30.14% in any one year (1990). At the same time, the percentage of books published in the country in the target years never rose above 14.0% (in 1950). Clearly, a librarian can rely on the *NYTBR* to identify fiction titles in abundance, though these figures of course say nothing about the quality of fiction titles.

Science titles, on the other hand, are consistently underrepresented. The number of science titles reviewed remains fairly constant throughout the period encompassed by

this study, with a slight upward blip in 1990 (when it reaches 7.53%). But this number falls far short of what we might have expected given the number of titles published; the relative number reached a peak in 1980 when a surprising 21.8% of the titles published were in the science, technology, and medicine fields. We might suggest reasons for this disparity. It is possible that the bulk of the science books published are in the realm of popular science, and felt to be unsuited for the *NYTBR*. It is also possible that the more rigorous, academic books were generally deemed by the *NYTBR*'s editors as too specialist in nature and thus not of interest to the general reader. At least until the most recent two or three decades, academic writing in the humanities has been thought to be more widely accessible and less abstruse than academic writing in the sciences and social sciences, though this is less the case today. Researchers and scholars in the science/technology/medicine typically rely much more heavily on scholarly journals in order to communicate and exchange ideas than on monographs, and so for this reason as well scientific books may well be devalued, even by the editors at the *NYTBR*.

Social sciences are a relatively new field of intellectual endeavor, at least in comparison to the study of, say, history or literature. Many social science fields, particularly as represented in college and universities, came of age in the 1960s and later, especially as previously underrepresented segments of the population gained the opportunity to seek a higher education and came to acquire the type of education and expertise needed to write on issues of concern to them. These groups included the children and grandchildren (at first, mainly sons) of immigrants, typically with blue-collar roots, then later women and racial minorities. It is not at all surprising that as social science departments grew in size and stature in the 1960s and 1970s, an increasing

number of books were published in the social sciences. The jump from 13.7% of books published in 1960 to 24.5% in 1970 represents a dramatic shift, especially given that the 1960s represented a boom period in publishing, the number of new titles published more than doubling over the course of the decade. But here we come to an interesting fact: the number of reviews of social sciences titles did not rise nearly as quickly from 1960 to 1970 (only from 8.13% of the total to 13.04%). In fact, in 1980 there was an actual decline in number of social science titles reviewed, even though the social sciences, as a percentage of the total published output, continued to increase (to a remarkable 26.9% of the books published). It would not be until 1990 that the social sciences would at last be more accurately represented in the pages of the *NYTBR*. Greco (1997: 132-133) notes the continued rise to predominance of the various social science disciplines, especially sociology and economics, in the 1990s. Thus, there was a significant lag time of twenty years or more between the initial growth in publications in the various social science disciplines and a more proportionate, and appropriate, representation in the *NYTBR*. Howard (1992) has commented on the conservative nature of the *NYTBR*, and here, I think, we can see a good example of this conservatism. We might wonder whether this lag time may be a reflection of the gradual acceptance into the mainstream of the social sciences. Not so much its acceptance in academia, where already by the 1990s the social sciences were in a decline, but in terms of the reading preferences of the educated public, the primary readership of the *NYTBR*. The social sciences had not only become palatable to the reading public, but had even achieved mainstream status.

Allow me to anticipate another suggestion for the rise of the social sciences in the *NYTBR*, one that detractors of the publication may favor. In view of my decision to

include current events and journalism in the category of social sciences, is it the case that 1990 really saw a rise not so much of the social sciences in an academic sense as in a popular sense. I must admit that it was my expectation that the lurid political kiss-and-tell would bulk large, but it turns out not to be the case, at least not in 1990. Instead, the increased presence of the social sciences is due to demanding books on such topics as Afro centrism, privacy and the law, the population explosion, human prehistory, and U.S. economic policy. This is hardly lightweight fare. And while it is true that the six issues from 2000, where the social sciences are even more heavily represented, do contain a fair number of popular psychology titles and the like, the conclusion seems unavoidable: the *NYTBR* has devoted in recent years (at least 1990 and 2000) more space to serious works of social science, and now more accurately reflects, at least percentage-wise, the body of social science literature currently being published.

In comparison to the social sciences, the humanities, especially history, are well represented in the *NYTBR*. Presumably, this reflects in part the reading habits of the educated public, whose interests often tend toward History. The number of reviews of History books consistently outpaces the number of new titles published in the industry. It should be noted that Lindholm-Romantschuk's study (1998: 71) also found that a high percentage of her sample titles that were reviewed in the *NYTBR* were history books (28.7%), which was a lower percentage than in *The New York Review of Books* (36.4%), but higher than in the *Times Literary Supplement* (24.5%).

Sander (1991: 290-291) has called attention to the lack of coverage in American book reviews given to foreign works in translation. His contention that the absolute number of translated works reviewed in the United States (in all publications, and not just

the *NYTBR*) has declined is supported by the evidence collected here. However, interestingly, there is an upward blip in 2000, as the number of translated works (6.59%) rebounded to the highest level since 1970 (when they composed a robust 16.46%). This happened after having fallen to a nadir of 3.42% in 1990. Some cause for optimism for Sander and those concerned with the fate of foreign language works in the United States. We might also note the rise in the number of translated works in the decades after World War II. From a meager 4.78% in 1950, it then rose to 16.46% in 1960. Perhaps this increase, even though it proved short-lived, represents a United States that had become more connected to the wider world and more cosmopolitan (cf. Degen 1993). Of course, since the original language of the translated works was not recorded in this study, nothing can be said on this matter.

Now we are in a better position to address the issue of whether the decline in the public intellectual is reflected in who is writing reviews for the *NYTBR*. There may well not be an Edmund Wilson or a H. L. Mencken writing reviews today, though it could be countered that a Garry Wills or a Gore Vidal is.[3] The sample of reviews included in this study from 2000 did in fact include reviews by John Leonard and Garry Wills, though it must be admitted that there were few other names that would be generally recognized. But here we are in the realm of the subjective. If we measure the intellectual content of the reviews in terms of the number of university professors who appear as reviewers, the numbers are fairly stable over the years (see Table I). The percentage peeked in 1960 at 27.85%, but this year is the anomaly; the rest of the years fell between 12.78% and 19.88%. Yet, there is a statistically significant relationship between the percentage of professors as reviewers and date, with the significance at the .05 level (chi-square 13.12).

But most of the statistical discrepancy was accounted for by 1960. And it should be admitted that 2000 saw the second lowest percentage of professors as reviewers (13.12%). In conclusion, there is some reason to believe that fewer professors are writing reviews for the *NYTBR* than once was the case.

It is even more remarkable how stable and consistent the numbers for professors as authors were (Table II; see Appendix B). Over the entire period, professors authored 18.38% of the reviewed books. The reason that this number tracks so closely with the percentage of professor-reviewers is that, typically (though not always), an academic will be enlisted to review the work a fellow academic. In the case of the authors, however, there is no statistically significant relationship between professor as author and date (chi square 7.867). There was an upward blip in 1990, which accounted for the bulk of the departure from the expected. The number of professor-authors for 1990 and 2000 taken together was 21.4% -- almost exactly 3 percentage points higher than the overall average. Insofar as the percentage of professor-authors is a fair measure of the intellectual content of the *NYTBR*, there seems little justification to the oft-repeated contention, or at least suggestion, that the *NYTBR* has been somehow "dumbed down." Professors' books are being reviewed today in the *NYTBR* at a rate not significantly different from fifty years ago.

The number of university press titles reviewed in the *NYTBR* provides a further cautionary note for those who may be quick to assume that the review is not what it once was. It is notoriously difficult to determine how many books are published annually in the United States; depending on how they are counted, there are as few as 50,000 or as many as more than 100,000. According to the *Association of American University*

Presses (AAUP) Directory, more than 11,000 university press titles were published in 1999; Lindholm-Romantschuk (1998: 72), on the other hand, reports that a far smaller number, only about 6000, are published in a typical year.[4] Regardless of how we choose to count them, it is clear that the number of university press books published has increased dramatically over the last several decades. According to the *AAUP Directory* for 1991-1992 and 1981-1982, the number of university press titles published in 1990 and 1980 was, respectively, approximately 7500 and 4600.[5] Using 11,000 as the figure for 1999, this represents roughly a 150% increase in the number of university press titles published over the last twenty years. Their growth reflects the concomitant growth in higher education over this period and especially the need for more venues in which newly created PhD academics can publish their research in order to meet tenure requirements.

University press titles composed 10.91% of the total number of books published in the country in 1980. After the explosion of the university presses in the 1980s, they increased their share of market in 1990 to 16.20%. In the course of the 1990s, they returned to their former level, reaching 10.15% in 2000. It is uncanny how closely these numbers are matched by the percentage of university press titles appearing in the *NYTBR*. In 1980, they constituted 8.27% of the titles reviewed; by 1990, the percentage had risen to an impressive 20.55%, reflecting the relative numeric strength of the university presses at that time; and by 2000, they had returned very nearly to the former level at 9.58%. It seems that the *NYTBR* has very accurately been reflecting the book publishing industry over the last two decades. It might be argued that we could reasonably have expected the *NYTBR* to have reviewed a somewhat higher proportion of university press titles than their share of the market, given that a disproportionate percentage of serious works of

fiction and nonfiction is published by the university presses. This is a fair criticism, but again it is worth emphasizing that the goal of the *NYTBR* is not to publish scholarly books *per se*. It could just as easily be argued that the university press increasingly publishes works of interest only to a select audience of scholars and thus typically would not be the source of the sort of book to appear in the *NYTBR*. Others, such as Greco (2001), argue that as commercial publishers abandon "serious" literature aimed at a more general audience, the financially strapped university presses should pursue this market more eagerly.

The university presses represented most heavily in my sample were the following: Oxford (22 books reviewed), Harvard (17), and Yale (10). No other university press had more than six titles reviewed. That these three presses were frequently subject to review is not surprising, in that they are all large and very well respected. For instance, Metz and Stemmer (1996: 239) found that, in the estimation of academic librarians, Harvard had the highest reputation of all academic publishers, and Oxford the third highest. In view of their findings, the relatively large number of prestige university press titles, at least Oxford and Harvard, is not surprising.

But according to *The Association of American University Presses Directory, 2000-2001*, the number of books published in 1999 by Oxford, Harvard, and Yale were, respectively, 1931, 142, and 364. Thus, at least in terms of output, Harvard University Press is not a particularly large press. Conspicuously, Cambridge University Press, which according to 1999 statistics was the largest university press (2113 titles), had only one book reviewed in the sample; Cambridge ranked second in reputation in the Metz-Stemmer study (1996: 239). Further, Johns Hopkins University Press, another large

press, which published 237 titles in 1999, is not represented even once in the sample. Compare this with the number of times much smaller, more regional presses, like Mississippi (twice), Oklahoma (twice), or Indiana (four times) appear. (Compare these figures to the number of titles published by these three presses in 1999 – respectively, 52, 114, 154.)

These findings agree only in broad outlines with those of Lindholm-Romantschuk (1998: 72-77). She too found that Oxford was the university press represented the most frequently in the *NYTBR*, by a wide margin (27 of her sample titles). Yale (with 15), Harvard (with 13), California (11), and Princeton (10) followed. Far fewer of the smaller, more regional university presses were represented in her study than appeared in the current one. For instance, only one review of an Indiana University Press book turned up in her sample, and none at all did for the University Presses of Mississippi or Oklahoma. Her methodology, however, differed substantively from that adopted for this study. Her sample books came from the Annual List of Outstanding Books published by *Choice*. Her sample of university press titles was thus biased; her numbers reflect more the preferences of *Choice* than they do the *NYTBR*. This study thus much more accurately measures the relative number of titles published by the different university presses chosen by the *NYTBR* for review. From the data collected, there appears no reason to conclude that the major university presses are disproportionately reviewed by the *NYTBR*. At a minimum, it seems that we can safely say that the *NYTBR* is doing a better job covering the smaller presses than it once did. The disparities in coverage between Oxford and the other large presses, on the one hand, and the smaller, more

regional presses, on the other, are simply not out of line, according to the findings of this study.

Herbert Schilling claimed that one only "occasionally" would find books published by small or alternative presses reviewed in the *NYTBR*. Do the numbers bear out his contention? For 2000 at least, the numbers are ambivalent. Certainly, the percentage is not huge – just below 12%. But this is not an abysmally low percentage either – certainly not low enough to cause us to wonder whether there is a conspiracy against the small publisher. Of course, there is always going to be a tendency for the *NYTBR* to review the mainstream press, represented by the major conglomerates. After all, they are the publishers with the large publicity and promotion budgets, and their books are the ones, for better or worse, that tend to draw attention. The *NYTBR* is not wholly to blame for this.

Several alternative presses that critics are wont to point to as being underrepresented in the mainstream press can be found in the 2000 sample. Seven Stories Press, for example, had no fewer than three books reviewed in the sample. Steerforth Press also had three books reviewed. And when we consider that some publishers that many might think as "small," or at least "regional," were not recorded as small for the purposes of this study, it can be argued that in actuality this figure rather understates the number of small press-type titles reviewed. One good example is Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill (N.C.), which is a subsidiary of Workman Publishing. Some might well consider Algonquin a small press – in terms of numbers, it publishes between 25 and 30 books per year.[6] Two Algonquin books were included in the sample taken from 2000, and had they been coded as small press titles, the small press figure

would have risen to over 13%. This still does not constitute an inordinately large percentage, given the number of small press publishers and the number of small press titles published annually, some might say. Yet, 12% means that in a typical issue of the *NYTBR* with twenty-five or thirty book reviews, one can expect to find perhaps three small press titles reviewed. It seems to me that this qualifies as more than the "occasional" small press review that Schilling said that we were likely to find. Incidentally, for similar reasons, the apparent decline in the number and percentage of small press titles reviewed is to be viewed skeptically; it is likely that the figures for the earlier years have been inflated due to the difficulties involved in determining which publishers could reasonably be considered small.

Notes

[1] On the problems involved in coming up with a method of accurately counting the number of titles published, see *The Bowker Annual of Library and Book Trade Information*. 45th ed. (New York: R.R. Bowker, 2000): 508-509.

[2] See the yearly volumes of *The Bowker Annual of Library and Book Trade Information*. In 1998, for instance, the number of adult titles reviewed by the *NYTBR* was 1857; in 1990, 1980, and 1970, it was 2000; in 1960, it was 2057.

[3] Note Howard (1992), who mentions a number of important figures known for their book reviewing active in the early 1990s.

[4] The 11,000 figure is nowhere explicitly stated in the *AAUP Directory*; the number of titles for each individual press had to be added up. Additionally, this figure includes titles published by Oxford and Cambridge, as well as by many Canadian university presses. Also included are other member institutions that we might not, by different standards, consider university presses, such as the Brookings Institute and the American Chemical Society. The inclusion of such presses at least partially accounts for the difference in counting.

[5] It is difficult to determine precisely how many university press titles were published in any given year, in part because of the surprising difficulty involved in determining what constitutes an American university press. These figures are simply taken from the *AAUP Directory*. Nowhere in these volumes is the total number of university press titles given; they had to be summed up. As a consequence, these figures should be taken with a grain of salt, since they give only a rough idea of the numbers involved.

[6] According to the Algonquin website, at http://www.algonquin.com/about.html (viewed April 16, 2001).

Areas for Future Research

In some respects, this study is a sort of starting point. The hope is that it has revealed what type of information can be gleaned from a study of the reviewing habits of the *NYTBR*. The scope of this project has prevented investigation into many possible areas of study. Some of these have already been hinted at. Some that come to mind include the number of women whose books are reviewed and the number of women who serve as reviewers. Presumably, the numbers here would increase, but it would be interesting to see how much, and whether women have increasingly been selected to review books written by men. Similarly the number of African-American, or other ethnic or racial minorities, who appear in the *NYTBR* would be interesting to measure, even if this would be a bit more difficult task. This study focused only on broad subject categories, such as the humanities and social sciences. More targeted subject areas, such as Native American studies, could also be investigated, or perhaps interdisciplinary, or cross-disciplinary, studies. A superficial perusal of most university press catalogs of the plains or southwest states reveals far more books on Native Americans, many written from a consciously Native American perspective, and many by Native Americans themselves. None of these topics have been addressed, and all promise to tell us much about whatever bias may creep into the *NYTBR*. The *NYTBR*, as the review publication of the nation's newspaper of record, can be used as a basis of a social history of reading habits. Such a study would obviously necessitate a project on a much larger scale.

Similar studies could be done of rival publications of the *NYTBR*, most obviously *The New York Review of Books*, or in order to consider the British experience, the *Times Literary Supplement*. *The New York Review of Books* takes pride in its intellectual rigor, and would be interesting to investigate whether, or to what extent, this pride is justified, especially in comparison to the more lightweight *NYTBR*. Armed with this knowledge, librarians who use both, or all three, publications would be in a better position to say that they knew what type of book they were getting when they used these publications as selection sources.

Conclusion

Volkmar Sander has commented that the entire book reviewing process – the selection, the choice of reviewer, the space devoted to the review – is a "political act" (Sander 1991: 295), and in the *NYTBR*, where the stakes are commensurately higher than in any other publication, it is a political act of great consequence. This study has been an attempt to get at this part of the equation, by measuring, the types of books that the *NYTBR* has, over the course of the last half century, most typically selected for review. Awareness of the biases and the proclivities of the book reviewing industry is, of course, only part of the equation. The nature and quality of books being published also has to be considered.

Robert McChesney has been a consistent critic of modern communications, dominated (as he sees it) by the huge (and conservative) corporations. He has recently (1999) urged a call to arms by all interested parties, librarians explicitly included, to work for a more democratic media, and his clarion call has been echoed by Anne Lundin in the Millennium Project Research Agenda, which was cited at the beginning of this essay (Lundin 2000). But we can't hope to make the media accountable unless we know, quantifiably, what it is up to. Nor can we rely on tired assertions of fact, especially when they are easily controverted. The question of which manuscripts are published and thus transformed into books, and then which of these are selected for review is a vexing one

and productive of strong feelings. But mere lambastes are just that and nothing more without substantive proof to back up the claim.

As Howard (1992) has pointed out, the *NYTBR*, or any review publication aimed at a general audience, can review only what is published, and, moreover, will necessarily cater to the level of its intended readership. There is a built-in pressure on the general book reviews to become more "popular," in an attempt to appeal to the presumed tastes of the market (Howard 1992: 104-106). The counterpart to the *NYTBR* in the United Kingdom, insofar as there is one, is the venerable *Times Literary Supplement*. It is frequently noted that the level of sophistication and intellectual rigor is markedly higher in the *TLS* than in the *NYTBR*. This is a reflection of the smaller, more select, market at which the *TLS* is aimed (annual subscription rate of 50,000), as well as the likelihood of the more elevated literary culture in the UK. Howard sees a crisis in a so-called middlebrow culture and the general educated readership that traditionally composed this class (1992: 104-105). It seems to me that this is the more worthy object of our criticism, rather than the *NYTBR*.

Lindholm-Romantschuk (1998) has argued that the book reviewing process routinely plays a more important role in scholarly communication, at least in the humanities and social sciences, than has generally been credited. A large part of her argument hinges on her contention that book reviews tend to be interdisciplinary in nature, and thus play an important role in bringing work in other disciplines to the attention of scholars. Interdisciplinary review journals like the *NYTBR* play a particularly important role in this process, in that they seem to signal the appearance of a potentially important book and are a good predictor of the total number of reviews the title is likely

to receive (Lindholm-Romantschuk 1998: 75). Her argument has its attractions, but more, I think, still needs to be done to prove her point. In view of the overall tendency in scholarship in recent decades toward more recondite research, such a claim *prima facie* seems somewhat unlikely.[1]

The general public, however, provides the bulk of the readership for the *NYTBR*. What does the public wish to read (and purchase), and how is the publishing industry going about filling these desires? Again, we run up against a question the answer to which lies outside the scope of this essay. In a recent analysis of the book publishing industry that is more sober than some of the screeds issuing from the political left, Greco reviewed the current opinion, which is predominantly pessimistic (Greco 1997: esp. 197-212). A typical contention is that the conglomerate-controlled publishing world's concern with the bottom dollar overrides whatever motivation it might have to publish "good" literature. Greco, however, reasonably points out that such critiques tend to romanticize the publishing world of the past. Like all of America, the publishing world used to be overtly sexist and racist. The modern publishing world, for all its faults, may actually represent American more accurately. Its adherents may claim that in the past the publishing world was dominated by the cultural elite, and that today by contrast it has become more democratized. This is, in effect, precisely the point made by Howard, who goes on to note that *The New York Times* is the nation's newspaper of record, and because of this entrenched position is not, and perhaps should not expected to be, the place to go for daring selections among its book reviews (1992: 97). Perhaps Howard goes too far in his *apologia*, and perhaps we should hold the *NYTBR* to a higher standard, and expect it to play a more constructive role in the creation of a more elevated literary

culture. Of course, here the crisis in scholarly communications alluded to above, especially in the humanities and social sciences disciplines, comes into play. With some exceptions, scholars increasingly write on only recondite matters of concern to a few. Those in search of intellectually demanding books couched in language that accessible to the educated will too often search in vain, a fact that is particularly troubling in view of the continued large output of new titles in the United States. Alex Schiffrin has shown at the New Press (which is, admittedly, subsidized and run as a non-profit) that there is a market for challenging literature among the educated public, and so clearly the market, and the general population that it represents, should not be the sole object of blame.

Note

[1] For some cogent thoughts on the future of scholarly publishing and the university press, see now Teute (2001).

Appendix A

Table I-A -- 1950 Sample

Category	Titles in Sample	Percentage of Sample	Total Industry Percentage
Total Titles Reviewed	209	**	*
Humanities	40	19.14	16.90
History	15	7.18	5.30
Humanities + History	55	26.32	22.20
Social Sciences	20	9.57	12.10
Science	4	1.92	14.90
Memoir/Auto-biography	9	4.31	**
Popular	25	11.96	**
Biography	8	3.83	6.20
Translations	10	4.78	**
Reprints	2	0.96	**
Poetry	2	0.06	5.20
Fiction	87	41.63	14.00

*****Total Number of Titles Published: 8634
**Percentage of Total Published Titles Reviewed in *NYTBR*: 20.90
***No information found

Table I-B -- 1960 Sample

Category	Titles in Sample	Percentage of Sample	Total Industry Percentage
Total Titles Reviewed	158	**	*
Humanities	32	20.25	21.20
History	15	9.49	5.60
Humanities + History	47	22.49	26.80
Social Sciences	17	8.13	13.70
Science	5	3.16	16.20
Memoir/Auto-biography	17	10.76	***
Popular	16	7.66	***
Biography	18	3.83	6.20
Translations	26	11.39	***
Reprints	7	4.43	***
Poetry	8	5.06	3.30
Fiction	52	32.91	13.60

*****Total Number of Titles Published: 12069
**Percentage of Total Published Titles Reviewed in *NYTBR*: 11.30
***Numbers Not Found

Table I-C – 1970 Sample

Category	Titles in Sample	Percentage of Sample	Total Industry Percentage
Total Titles Reviewed	161	**	*
Humanities	22	13.66	15.20
History	23	15.23	4.20
Humanities + History	45	27.95	19.40
Social Sciences	21	13.04	24.50
Science	3	1.86	17.40
Memoir/Autobiography	11	6.83	***
Popular	9	5.59	***
Biography	7	4.35	3.00
Translations	15	9.32	***
Reprints	6	3.73	***
Poetry	6	3.73	4.00
Fiction	69	42.86	8.20

*****Total Number of Titles Published: 24288
**Percentage of Total Published Titles Reviewed in *NYTBR*: 8.23
**Numbers Not Found

Table I-D – 1980 Sample

Category	Titles in Sample	Percentage of Sample	Total Industry Percentage
Total Titles Reviewed	133	**	*
Humanities	14	10.53	18.30
History	12	9.02	5.30
Humanities + History	26	19.55	23.60
Social Sciences	11	8.27	26.90
Science	5	3.76	21.80
Memoir/Auto-biography	10	7.52	***
Popular	10	7.52	***
Biography	4	3.01	4.50
Translations	5	3.76	***
Reprints	4	3.01	***
Poetry	1	0.75	2.80
Fiction	58	43.61	6.70

*****Total Number of Titles Published: 42177
**Percentage of Total Published Titles Reviewed in *NYTBR*: 4.74
**Numbers Not Found

Table I-E – 1990 Sample

Category	Titles in Sample	Percentage of Sample	Total Industry Percentage
Total Titles Reviewed	146	**	*
Humanities	26	17.81	17.80
History	16	10.96	4.80
Humanities + History	42	28.77	22.60
Social Sciences	24	16.44	23.60
Science	11	7.53	18.10
Memoir/Auto-biography	15	10.27	***
Popular	21	14.38	***
Biography	20	13.70	4.20
Translations	5	3.42	***
Reprints	4	2.74	***
Poetry	1	0.68	1.90
Fiction	44	30.14	12.50

*****Total Number of Titles Published: 46283
**Percentage of Total Published Titles Reviewed in *NYTBR*: 4.32
***Numbers Not Found

Table I-E – 2000 Sample

Category	Titles in Sample	Percentage of Sample	Total Industry Percentage
Total Titles Reviewed	167	**	*
Humanities	21	12.57	19.35
History	15	8.99	6.78
Humanities + History	36	21.56	26.13
Social Sciences	34	20.36	22.37
Science	5	3.16	21.39
Memoir/Auto-biography	18	10.76	***
Popular	16	7.66	***
Biography	15	3.83	2.64
Translations	11	11.39	***
Reprints	5	4.43	***
Poetry	0	5.06	2.36
Fiction	65	32.91	9.38

*****Total Number of Titles Published: 113,304
**Percentage of Total Published Titles Reviewed in *NYTBR*: 1.77
***Numbers Not Found

Appendix B

Table II – Authors and Reviewers

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	Total	Average
Number of Titles Reviewed	209	158	161	133	146	167	974	162.33
Author								
**Professor	39	29	20	24	38	29	179	29.83
**Non-Professor	180	129	141	109	108	138	795	132.50
**Percentage of Professor Authors	18.66	18.35	12.42	18.05	26.03	17.37		18.38
**Expected Value	38.41	29.03	29.59	24.44	26.83	30.68		
**Chi Square	0.009	0.000	3.108	0.008	4.650	0.092	7.867	
Reviewer								
**Professor	33	44	32	17	29	23	178	29.67
**Percentage	15.79	27.85	19.88	12.78	19.86	13.77		18.28
**Expected Value	38.20	28.86	29.43	24.31	26.69	30.52		
**Chi Square	0.71	7.94	0.22	2.20	0.20	1.85	13.12	

Appendix C

Table III-A – University Presses

	1950	**1960**	**1970**	**1980**	**1990**	**2000**
Total Titles Published	8634	12069	24288	42177	46283	113304
Total U.P. Titles Published	N/A	N/A	N/A	4600	7500	11500
U.P. Titles as Percentage of Total Titles	N/A	N/A	N/A	10.91	16.20	10.15
Total Reviews	210	158	161	133	146	167
University Press Titles Reviewed	**23**	**17**	**10**	**11**	**30**	**16**

Table III-B – Small Presses*

	1950	**1960**	**1970**	**1980**	**1990**	**2000**	**Total**
Small Publishers	51	30	27	13	26	20	181
Percentage of Titles Reviewed	24.29	18.99	16.77	9.77	17.81	11.98	16.42

***** Numbers are for sample.

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